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C O N F I D E N T I A L SARAJEVO 003159

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DEPT FOR EUR (DICARLO), D (SMITH), P (BAME), EUR/SCE (HOH,
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SUBJECT: DEFENSE MINISTER DISCUSSES HIS FUTURE, PFP,
DEFENSE REFORM

Classified By: Ambassador Douglas McElhaney for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) In a wide ranging discussion, Defense Minister Nikola Radovanovic said he did not want to continue in his post in the next Bosnian government. The minister cited his fatigue and general exasperation with the political process as reasons for his wish to leave the ministry. Despite Radovanovic's signaled departure, we will continue to push for a like-minded apolitical candidate to take the post. The minister also spoke of the need for Bosnia to be an active participant in Partnership for Peace (PfP) programs, and the possibility of switching Bosnia's coalition deployment from Iraq to Afghanistan.

RADOVANOVIC: TIME TO MOVE ON

¶2. (C) Background: Bosnian Defense Minister Radovanovic's position has become increasingly precarious in recent months, as Republika Srpska Prime Minister Milorad Dodik has made clear he will not push to have the position reserved for a Bosnian-Serb in any coalition. As a strong ally in the defense reform process, we have encouraged political leaders across the ethnic spectrum to keep Radovanovic in his post, leaving the defense minister portfolio outside of the broader discussions of ethnic balance within the Council of Ministers and party affiliation in the future coalition (Note. The recently created defense ministry is the "10th" slot in the Council of Ministers, whose portfolios have typically divided 3-3-3 among Bosnia's constituent ethnic groups. End note.) Recently, contacts within and outside the ministry have informed us that Radovanovic has privately expressed strong misgivings about remaining in the job, and that he is increasingly absent from the ministry. End Background.

¶3. (C) During a meeting December 12, the Ambassador asked Radovanovic whether he wished to remain in his post. Radovanovic replied that he did not want to continue, as he was very tired and found it increasingly difficult to work in the current political climate. Radovanovic listed several candidates rumored to succeed him, including current Bosnian Ambassador to the U.S. Bisera Turkovic (Bosniak), the EU/NATO Ambassador Sven Alkalaj (Bosniak), and Head of the MOD's Office of General and Joint Affairs Stepjan Pocrnja (Croat). Radovanovic registered strong objections to Alkalaj, noting

that he was "lazy" and too closely aligned with President Haris Silajdzic and the Party for BiH. Turkovic's appointment would force Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Podzic's early removal, since she is also a Bosniak, and it would be politically impossible to have two Bosniaks in the top two defense jobs. Podzic's removal, now, after an election, would also undercut efforts to isolate the job from politics,

PFP AND COALITION SUPPORT

14. (C) Ambassador suggested that Bosnia be pro-active in seeking avenues for participation in Pfp, especially with its neighbors. Radovanovic agreed, and suggested that a special forces exercise or other small regional training program could be organized under Pfp auspices. Radovanovic stated he also hoped that Pfp activities would be focused on all areas and across the spectrum, to show the program was "not just for generals and ministers." The minister also voiced his support for demining to become Bosnia's "niche" capability within NATO. Noting that Bosnia's domestic demining capabilities could be teamed up with military capacities to provide training opportunities to other alliance partners, Radovanovic requested USG support for making this a focus of Bosnia's Pfp cooperation activities.

15. (C) Radovanovic said that Bosnia would be unable to contribute to both the Iraq and ISAF mission in Afghanistan. He claimed that the Explosive Ordinance Disposal (EOD) unit in Iraq was under-used in Iraq, and was finding its workload increasingly light. The minister also raised CENTCOM's concerns about Bosnian forces' inability to provide for their own security in Iraq, saying that the time might be right to transition the deployment to the NATO mission Afghanistan.

DEFENSE REFORM

16. (C) In response to Ambassador's question about the progress of defense reform implementation, Radovanovic complained that the international community's criticism of its pace was unhelpful. The minister seemed particularly displeased with recent Office of the High Representative (OHR) complaints about the continuing failure to resolve property ownership issues between the state-level ministry and entities. Claiming that it was the "first time" he had heard these concerns, Radovanovic speculated that that OHR had been sending "overly optimistic" reports to Brussels and now had to backtrack (Comment. According to the law on defense, all defense property was to be transferred to the ministry, and the failure to do so is a cause for concern. The fact that OHR-- and NATO, and officials in the MOD, and us-- have pushed to have this resolved should not be surprising, nor unreasonable. End comment.) Radovanovic stated that he hoped to have all personnel decisions finished by December 28, and that the selection committees had worked 12-hour days to complete the process. Ambassador suggested that if legitimate reasons existed for a continued delay in defense reform elements, Radovanovic should be more pro-active in explaining them to head off criticism.

COMMENT: A STRAIGHT ANSWER FROM THE MINISTER?

17. (C) After weeks of ambiguity about his desire to remain as defense minister, Radovanovic seems to have provided a definitive answer about his intentions. While he may indeed stay at his post if asked by the coalition partners, a highly unlikely possibility, Radovanovic signaled that he no longer wants the job. The departure of Radovanovic would not deal a crippling blow to defense reform in itself, but some of the individuals rumored as his successors give us cause for concern. In our discussions with political leaders, we will continue to stress the need for the defense minister to

remain an individual who is apolitical, NATO-oriented,
squarely focused on fully implementing defense reform and
whose ethnicity balances the defense establishment.

MCELHANEY